

“Having ‘the Talk’ With Your Teen”
May is National Teen Pregnancy Prevention Month

By

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After 14 straight years of decline the teen pregnancy and birth rates are now on the rise again, according to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. The teen birth rate declined by one-third over a 17-year period up to 2008, but the teen pregnancy and birth rates in the U.S. are still higher than in any other Western industrialized country. Since May is Teen Pregnancy Prevention Month, I want to share with you some research-based facts about teen childbearing from the website, as follows:

- Only *about half* of young teen mothers (age 17 and younger) graduate from high school and *fewer than 2%* earn a college degree by age 30.
- Children of teen mothers *do worse in school* than those born to older parents. They are *50% more likely to repeat a grade* and are *less likely to complete high school* than the children of older mothers; they also have *lower performance on standardized tests*.
- Teen childbearing in the United States costs taxpayers (federal, state, and local) *at least \$9.1 billion*, according to a National Campaign report. Most of the costs of teen childbearing are associated with negative consequences for the children of teen mothers, including increased costs for healthcare, foster care, and incarceration.
- *Three in ten girls* in the United States become pregnant by age 20.
- At present, there are about *750,000 teen pregnancies* and *more than 400,000 teen births* annually.
- Teens consistently say that *parents most influence* their decisions about sex. So, what's a parent to do when faced with these facts about teens and risky behaviors involving sex? Here are some practical suggestions:
- **Be respectful and talk honestly about relationships.** One of teens' consistent gripes over the years is that parents don't take teen relationships seriously. Teens want parents to know that just because they are young doesn't mean that they can't fall in love. They want parents to know that the feelings they have are very real to them. So, let them know that you hear them and that you are respectful of

the feelings they have. At the same time, don't be shy about telling them what you think and *why* you think the way you do. Remember though, it should be a conversation, not a lecture.

- **Help your teen deal with pressure.** Lots of teens say that they feel pressure in their relationships to have sex. Many think that having sex is the price of entry for a relationship or the thing that will keep a relationship together. As adults, we know that this is both untrue and, even worse, extremely unhealthy thinking. Your advice should be direct. If sex is the price of a relationship, find someone else.
- **Encourage completion of education.** Research makes clear that young people who finish high school (or, better still, get a college degree), wait until their twenties to marry, and have children after they marry are much more likely to achieve their life goals than those who do not follow this sequence. Teach your children about this “**success sequence**” and make clear to them that education is a priority in your home. Consider this example: A child born to an unmarried teen mother who has not finished high school is *nine times more likely to be poor* than a child born to adult parents who have married and have graduated from high school.
- **Let your teen know you are on call 24/7.** Make sure your sons and daughters know that you are always there for them, that you always have a sympathetic ear, and that no topic is off-limits. Never underestimate the great need that children feel at all ages for close relationships with their parents and for their parents' guidance, approval, and support. This may mean some extremely awkward or difficult conversations. It may mean resisting, with all of your willpower, the urge to cover your ears and pretend your child did not just ask you that question! But know that it's just as awkward and difficult for them to broach the subject as it is for you to hear it. Address their concerns and questions with respect and sensitivity and, over time, both you and your teen will become comfortable having these conversations.

To circle back to where we started, and to summarize, teens really do want to hear from their parents about relationships, even if they do not always act like it. And it's never too late (or too early) to start these conversations. There are appropriate messages and conversation-starters for every age group. To get help with starting the talk with your teen, go to the website, www.thenationalcampaign.org. There are suggestions and ideas for beginning this conversation with young people about sex, as well as, a link for ideas and suggestions for teens who have questions. Go to this website and see for yourself! Hopefully, the information gained from this article will benefit you for many years to come as you strive to raise your kids to make healthy and risk-free decisions!